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The Successes, Challenges, and Possibilities of PUT in the School of Contemporary International Studies

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Abstract

Power-Up! Tutorial (PUT) is an oral communication course offered to first-year students in a number of departments at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). The focus of this paper is limited to PUT in the School of Contemporary International Studies (SCIS). Since it was introduced in 2003, PUT has undergone some minor and major changes. This paper introduces PUT from three different perspectives: the past, the present, and the future. Within each time frame, some of the important changes will be mentioned along with the impacts they have had on the program.

1. Introduction

In the School for Contemporary International Studies (SCIS) at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS) all students in their first year take an oral communication course called Power-Up! Tutorial (PUT). Many students after they move onto their second year often wish they could take the equivalent course to PUT. Unfortunately, PUT is a unique language course only offered in the first year. Many students praise the course as being their favourite and most

fun course. Importantly, many of the tutors who are involved with the program share similar sentiments.

Since its inception in 2003, PUT has undergone both minor and major changes. Sometimes adjustments were made in an attempt to provide a higher quality program that enabled more students to successfully reach the goals of the course. Some minor changes include replacing the textbook with worksheets and weekly evaluations with a midterm and final evaluation. At other times, adjustments were made in reaction to changes imposed by the university. These changes include reducing class time from ninety minutes to forty-five minutes and raising the student to tutor ratio from 3:1 to 4:1.

The objective of this paper is to introduce PUT from three important perspectives. The first is what PUT has been, where I highlight the elements of the program that have been successful. The second is what PUT is now, where I highlight the current challenges. The third is what PUT ought to be, where I highlight future possibilities for an improved program.

2. What is Power-Up! Tutorial

PUT is an oral communication course designed to improve students' confidence in having English conversations about daily topics. PUT is only offered to students in their first year. Students have multiple opportunities each class to share their ideas and opinions at a table with other students and a tutor. Students are taught skills that help develop their ability to communicate in English as they learn about various cultural anecdotes from tutors originating from many different countries. The low student to tutor ratio in PUT enables students to regularly interact with tutors, a unique feature not common in other foreign language courses.

3. Theoretical Influences

The main theoretical framework that PUT is based on is sociocultural

theory, and two important concepts: zone of proximal development (ZPD), and scaffolding. I will provide a brief outline of sociocultural theory along the two accompanying concepts as well as a note on their relevance to PUT.

3.1 Sociocultural theory

Psychologist and educator Lev Vygotsky was influential in establishing what we know about sociocultural theory. Vygotsky proposed that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of acquiring knowledge. Learning, including language development, happens as a result of social interactions, such as family life, peer groups, school, and organized recreation (Bankovic 2015).

Social interaction is integral to PUT because it is fundamentally an oral communication course. Students develop their language skills through interacting with classmates and native English speakers. Students' cognitive development occurs in part due to the social interactions they are having in class.

3.2 Zone of proximal development

Zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a useful concept when describing sociocultural theory. Vygotsky defines ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky 1978:86). In other words, ZPD is the knowledge that is within grasp of a student's understanding if he/she were assisted by a more capable peer, parent, teacher, etc.

In PUT, students are placed in different classes based on the score of a proficiency test taken before the semester begins. One of the benefits of this step is students who are similar in proficiency are placed in the same class and are able to interact. Slightly more capable peers are able to model language that is in the zone of their classmates. Additionally, tutors can adjust their language to within the zone of students in class. ZPD plays an important role in PUT, helping guide

the language development of the students.

3.3 Scaffolding

Scaffolding is giving necessary support to students during the learning process which is modified to their learning needs. It represents the helpful activities provided by the more capable peers, teachers, parents, etc., to help students through the ZPD. Support is gradually removed as it becomes unnecessary and students should be able to complete the speaking tasks on their own afterwards.

In PUT, as students move from their first conversation to their third, support given by the tutors is pulled back. The first conversation may consist of instant correction and language modeling by the tutor. The second conversation may consist of occasional language modeling in conversation form with little or no instant correction from the tutor. The third conversation has almost no help from the tutor, leaving the responsibility of comprehension in the hands of the students.

4. Core Elements

In this section, I will introduce four elements that are fundamental to PUT. They are recursive practice, table conversations, low student to tutor ratio, and Cultural diversity. They have been integral parts of the program since its inception in 2003. Despite the numerous changes to PUT over the years, for example, minor changes initiated by tutors trying to improve the program, or major changes directed by the university, these core elements have remained unchanged. They are the defining characteristics of this successful program.

4.1 Recursive practice

The first core element is recursive practice. Kindt and Bowyer refer to recursive practice (conversations) as a “return to a similar experience — but with a wider knowledge” (Kindt and Bowyer 2018: p. 103). In PUT, the topic of

conversation is established beforehand. The focus of conversation in class is on just one topic. Students have multiple opportunities for conversation in English about the chosen topic. It is recursive because each conversation is with a different group of students and tutor. This change allows students to make another attempt with new knowledge at the same conversation without feeling they are repeating themselves.

Recursive practice plays an important role in PUT. Students are able to become more confident in their speaking ability if they are able to revisit the conversation multiple times during class. Successes in the first conversation can be repeated in the second and third conversations. Additionally, failures in the first conversation can be corrected and avoided for the second and third conversations.

4.2 Table conversations

The second core element of PUT is table conversations. PUT is held in classrooms comprised of five large round tables. On average, there are three students that sit at each table with one tutor. This classroom design provides two important functions. First, an authentic experience in English — designed to mimic casual conversations students are likely to have both on and off campus. Second, to facilitate the recursive element of the conversations — multiple interactions between students and tutors. Additionally, one important benefit of this classroom design is the closeness that is created between students and tutors. Tutors are more easily able to tailor feedback after the third conversation. In other words, the individualized feedback provided to students is made possible by the closeness of the interactions.

A critical element in PUT is to help students develop confidence in speaking English and this unique learning environment where students can have focused conversations at a table with their classmates and a tutor helps to achieve this.

4.3 Low student to tutor ratio

The third core element is a low student to tutor ratio. There are relatively few students in the classroom for every tutor. PUT classes average fifteen students with five tutors, giving a unique ratio of 3:1. Most other language classes in SCIS have a student to teacher ratio of 20:1 or higher. The individual attention available to students in a classroom that has a low ratio has benefits, especially in a program like PUT. This low student to tutor ratio compliments important elements of the program, for example, conversations at the table and recursive practice.

The opportunity to interact with native English speakers is a major draw for many students to the university. The low student to tutor ratio of PUT provides students this opportunity multiple times each class. Moreover, the tutors come from diverse backgrounds, enabling students to interact and gain knowledge of a variety of cultures.

4.4 Cultural diversity

The fourth core element in PUT is cultural diversity. Native English speakers often come from a variety of countries and cultural backgrounds. Over the years, tutors typically come from more common native English-speaking countries such as Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and United States. However, there have also been tutors who come from less common native English-speaking countries such as Cameroon, Kenya, Philippines, and Zimbabwe. Each tutor can offer their national cultural characteristics which are common amongst most people of that country. This can include knowledge about popular music, fashion, food, economy, etc. What also is beneficial for students in PUT is that each tutor can bring their individual cultural characteristic which is unique to that tutor. This can include ethnic, racial, and religious identities.

Students can benefit from interactions in English when tutors come from varied backgrounds. Exposure to different ways of doing things, different types

of celebrations, festivals, worship, and different ideas helps students become more knowledgeable and makes it easier for them to interact with the world outside the language classroom.

5. Past Successes

In this section, I will introduce five aspects of PUT that were a part of the program from the beginning in 2003, but are no longer part of the current PUT program. The four aspects are Recursive Recording of Student Conversations (RRSCs), Tools for Increasing Proficiency in Speaking (TIPS), Students' Own Conversation Cards (SOCCs), 10/10/15-minute conversations, and evaluated third conversations. I will briefly describe these aspects with a comment on why they were removed from PUT.

5.1 RRSCs

Recursive Recording of Student Conversations (RRSCs) was a four-step activity carried out twice a semester as part of evaluating students' performance in the course. In the first step, students would audio record a five to seven-minute conversation in pairs on a chosen topic. In the second step, students transcribe on paper part of their recorded conversation. In the third step, students make grammatical corrections and add improvements to their transcribed conversation. In the fourth step, students compose their reflections on the previous three steps.

The RRSC activity provided three key benefits. First, the recording of student conversations added an element of formality. Students knowing that their conversations will be evaluated, generally made a stronger effort compared to conversations at the table in the regular classes. Second, the transcribing step of the activity allowed students to review their conversation *offline* (contrasted with when they recorded *live*). The benefit of reviewing a conversation offline was students had time to compose what they *want to say*, as opposed to, what they *did say* under the time constraints of a live recording. Students are often able to

find errors in their recorded conversation through the activity of transcribing it. Students are often nervous during a recorded conversation which often results in more frequent mistakes. Students are also able to make improvements to the conversation once it is offline because they have enough time to consider a better approach to the conversation. Improvements typically include adding conversation techniques (CTs) with the aim of helping the conversation better reflect the goals of the course. The third benefit of RRSCs was students were able to reflect on various steps of the activity with the aim of internalizing what they have learned. If they are able to comment on what they found challenging and the best approach for avoiding that difficulty in the future, they are making progress to improving their conversation skills.

The main reason why RRSCs was removed from the program was due to time constraints. Class duration of PUT was reduced from ninety minutes to forty-five minutes. This 50% reduction in class time was a significant challenge to overcome. It was decided to prioritize student conversations in class through recursive practice rather than using RRSCs.

5.2 TIPS textbook

Tools for Increasing Proficiency in Speaking (TIPS) was the textbook that accompanied PUT since its inception in 2003. TIPS was utilized to demonstrate how to use tools such as *Useful Expressions*, *Example Conversations*, and *Conversation Strategies* with the aim of increasing proficiency in speaking English.

The textbook was designed so that one chapter could be completed each week. The first page of each chapter introduced the topic, such as Family, Music, Travel, etc. From the second page onwards, two example conversations were introduced with web links to audio recordings of the two conversations. The first example conversation was between two native English speakers, while the second conversation was between two students. After the two example

conversations, the chapter's *Conversation Strategy* (CS — but currently called *Communication Technique*) was introduced. The CS page introduced skills with examples students could use to improve their own conversations. Finally, each chapter contained pages of *Helpful Hints* and example *Students' Own Conversation Cards* (SOCCs). SOCCs were index cards students would make for homework and use in class to support their table conversations. Key words, questions, and pictures were added to help them in class. The helpful hints page of TIPS gave students support for making their SOCCs. Also, useful expressions and grammar notes were included to help students when they talked about the topic. For each topic, two example SOCCs were included. These example cards provide ideas on how students could make their own card as well as sample questions that could be included and be used during the table conversations.

TIPS was a resource that students had with them in the classroom and was used at home to prepare their SOCCs. The example conversations with audio provided a useful model of language used by a more knowledgeable other (native speakers) as well as near-peer (students), as outlined earlier in the ZPD of Dygotsky's sociocultural theory. Students were provided with one model that was at a higher level than their own, but was something that they could aim towards, and one model that was near their level, to help them relate and build confidence.

The main reason TIPS is no longer used in the program is because there is not enough time in the forty-five minute class to make use of a lot of the content in the textbook. Most of the supplementary content is now provided in weekly worksheets. Communication techniques, target language, and useful questions are provided each week in place of TIPS.

5.3 SOCCs

One important part of PUT was for students to prepare their own cards with notes, drawings, or pictures to be used in class as a tool for support during the

communication activities. Students' Own Conversation Cards (SOCCs) were typically written on B5-size index cards as homework before class. To make their own cards, students would refer to the TIPS textbook and the chapter for the assigned topic. The first page of each chapter contained images and vocabulary to help the students think about the topic. Students could also listen to and read the example conversations in TIPS. Finally, at the end of each chapter there was a *Helpful Hints* page that provided detailed instructions on how to make their own card.

The purpose of SOCCs was twofold. First, students would use the activity to prepare for class. By making their cards, they were reading, listening, and creating information about the topic. Second, the cards were used in class during the conversations. It was important that students not write a lot of detail on their cards. The words and images were to be used as cues to help assist the student during the conversation.

Many students enjoyed making their own cards. It provided students with the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas in a non-verbal way. Some students who were shy in class used the cards as an outlet for expression. Other students who were artistic created interesting and beautiful cards. The notes and images provided the necessary information to help students improve their conversations.

In place of SOCCs, currently, space on the weekly worksheets is provided to students to prepare as homework what they want to talk about at the table. While B5-size index cards are no longer used, the main aspects of preparing for the conversation beforehand and creating visual cues for maintaining the conversation remain.

5.4 10/10/15-minutes conversations

A PUT class comprises of three conversations. The topic remains the same for all three conversations, but the interlocutors change. Since tables are used in

the PUT rooms, one tutor is seated at a table with an average of three students. Each student receives a seating card upon entering the classroom and they follow the seating card for all three conversations. This system allows students to have a conversation in English three times during the class with a variety of students and three different native English speakers. This recursive practice was designed to help improve the students' confidence by allowing them to try the same conversation again with more knowledge gained through reflecting on vocabulary and phrases they used and adjusting delivery in the second and third conversations accordingly.

The benefit of having three conversations was to incorporate recursive practice. The first two conversations were set at ten minutes — an appropriate amount of time for students to negotiate meaning with their classmates and tutor. The third conversation was set at fifteen minutes to allow students more time to express themselves without support of a tutor, as well as, more time for a deeper, more meaningful conversation.

The total length of time spent in conversation during class currently has been reduced from thirty-five minutes to thirty minutes. This is attributed to the reduction in class time by fifty percent to forty-five minutes. The new distribution of time in the three conversations is 10/10/10. This was decided in favour of two fifteen-minute conversations to better support recursive practice.

5.5 Evaluated third conversations

The support tutors give to students is scaffolded as they move through the three conversations. For the third conversation, guidance of the tutor on the direction, fluidity, meaningfulness, etc., is pulled back, leaving the responsibility entirely in the hands of the students. The role of the tutor in the third conversation is to observe and evaluate.

Each tutor evaluates an average of three students at the table using a rubric designed by the full-time PUT tutors. For the evaluation, students are given a

score for each of the criteria from the rubric and recorded on a score card during the conversation. The tutor also takes notes of what was done well during the conversation, and what could be improved for next time. Verbal feedback, along with the students' score are given back after the conversation by the tutor.

The evaluation of the third conversation has been replaced by a midterm and final conversation activity. The main reason for this is to help shift the focus away from performance, and direct it more towards maintaining a positive and enjoyable learning environment.

6. Present Challenges

Of the numerous changes that have been encountered in PUT over the years, the single most significant change has been the reduction of class time from ninety minutes to forty-five minutes. As a result, there are two important implications. The first is how table changes are organized in a shorter class, and the second is the time lost by tutors dominating the conversation. This next section will introduce the challenges and note how they have impacted the program.

6.1 Table changes

A long-running characteristic of PUT has been students changing tables for each of their three conversations. Upon entering the PUT classroom, students are handed a seating card by the class leader (head tutor). On their seating card is written three letters, corresponding to the tables in the room. Students first sit at the table corresponding to the first letter on their seating card. After the first conversation, they move to the table that corresponds to the second letter on their seating card, and so on. By the third conversation, they have sat at three different tables, with three different tutors, and many different students.

Although this table change system is a good way to ensure recursive practice during class, it has one significant drawback — the table changes can be very slow. One table delaying the change can have a compounding effect on all

other tables. The 10/10/15-minute conversations become difficult to achieve. A solution that is often attempted to speed up table changes is teaching students how to promptly finish conversations. A conversation skill is introduced to show how to wrap up a conversation naturally. Rather than students saying “It is time to change tables, good bye.”, they are encouraged to say something like, “Oh, the bus is coming. I’ve got to go. Nice chatting with you.” In PUT, authentic conversation style is emphasized, therefore, learning how to finish a conversation naturally and in a timely manner is essential.

6.2 Tutor Talk Time

In addition to providing a model for natural English usage, many tutors come from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is important in PUT for students to have opportunities to interact with tutors as a means of practicing their conversation skills, but also, learn about the various cultures represented by the tutors.

During the first of three table conversations, tutors are encouraged to participate in the conversations with the students. Participation in this context means providing cultural anecdotes and examples drawn from their home countries. Many students enjoy this opportunity and it becomes one of the highlights of the course. It is important, however, that the anecdotes are relevant to the topic and do not monopolize the conversation. Students should maintain control of the conversation. Tutor participation during the first conversation also means they are available to offer correction, alternate word usage, and examples to help students perform better in the conversations.

One of the major challenges in PUT is managing an effective scaffolding process where tutor involvement is heavier in the first conversation and gradually pulled back in the second, to non-existent in the third conversation. Some tutors tend to want to participate in all three conversations equally. Another challenge is when some tutors observe a mistake or a breakdown in communication, they tend to want to assist the conversation instantly, rather than making a note of it

and bringing it up in feedback after the conversation is finished.

These challenges are important because they take away valuable speaking time from students. A balance needs to be struck between tutors providing enough input to make the class interesting and enough pull-back to make the class an opportunity for students to speak English. One effective solution is to continuously remind tutors of the importance of the scaffolding process and the goals of the course.

7. Future Possibilities

This section will focus on three major changes that are designed to offer students more opportunity to speak in reduced class time. Fitting in three conversations has proven to be a challenge in a forty-five minute class, but as mentioned in section 4, recursive practice is a core element of the program and we should strive to maintain it. There are three major changes that will attempt to increase student talk time in class. First relates to RRSCs, the second relates to table changes, and the third is how evaluations are carried out.

7.1 Discontinue RRSCs

RRSCs have always been an integral part of PUT. Even though there have been minor adjustments over the years, the main process has remained the same. A major criticism of this activity was that it was time consuming. Two full ninety-minute classes were allocated for this activity. Time restrictions imposed by forty-five-minute classes made RRCSs impractical. There was simply not enough time in class to get it all done. For this reason, PUT will not include a recording activity as part of the evaluation.

Time in class normally spent on RRSCs will be allocated to more speaking. This is a compromise, as there were benefits of the RRSCs, however, more time spent speaking English in class with classmates and tutors better reflects the goals of the course.

7.2 Discontinue table changes

Partly due to the difficulty in wrapping up table conversations on time and time lost during table changes, PUT will no longer have table changes as part of the program.

Tables changes have always played a significant role in facilitating recursive practice in PUT. Changing tables was beneficial for students because it gave them the opportunity to talk to many classmates and three different tutors.

A new plan was created to attain the same benefits as table changes without the loss of time. With this plan, students remain at the same table for the three conversations. To ensure recursive practice is not with the same partners for the three conversations, students will change partners at the table. The first conversation at the table will be with all group members, while the second and third conversations will be in student pairs. The pairs from the second to third conversations will change. Students will have the opportunity to sit at a new table with a different tutor the following class. Although the number of classmates and tutors each student can speak with during class is less compared with the table change system, the total amount of time spent in conversation will be greater. Similarly to removing RRSCs from the program, it is a compromise in favor of a greater focus on the goals of the course.

7.3 Discontinue evaluated third conversations

Each student in PUT was evaluated weekly by the tutor at their table during the third conversation. The conversation was scored and verbal feedback was given. One of the benefits of this evaluation method was students were able to instantly gauge their progress. When the third conversation was fresh in their mind, they became aware of what was done well and what needs to be improved for next time.

There are some drawbacks to this type of evaluation. First, some students have expectations of high evaluation scores. This is partly because they enjoy

having conversations in English and they feel their score should reflect their level of enjoyment. Often, when this is not the case, students can become discouraged. Second, some tutors have difficulty being accountable for their evaluation score. One explanation for this could be that in PUT, a friendly classroom atmosphere is encouraged, where students and tutors talk about a variety of everyday topics in English. In the interest of maintaining a positive and encouraging atmosphere, it can become challenging for some tutors to give low scores to students.

A new plan will be implemented where the weekly third-conversation evaluation will be replaced by two evaluations during the semester. The first will be at the midterm and the other at the end of term. Each student will have their conversation in pairs evaluated by a tutor. The format of the evaluation, however, will not change. Some of the benefits of this form of evaluation include a reduction in potential conflict when the evaluation score does not match students' expectations. An additional benefit is less emphasis in class on evaluation and more class time can be spent on the main goal of building confidence in speaking. A possible drawback is each evaluation is worth more points towards their final grade, making the performance in the two evaluated conversations more important.

Conclusion

Since 2003 there have been a number of changes in PUT. Some of them have been minor and have resulted in a program that enables more students to meet the goals of the course. There have also been some major adjustments made as a result of changes originating from the university — reducing class time by fifty percent and changing the student to tutor ratio to 4:1. Considering all of the past successes, current challenges and future possibilities, PUT still remains one of the school's most popular courses, one that has students speaking English with more confidence.

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